

Cronin's Key Guide to Australian Mammals

by Leonard Cronin

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This is the third book in Cronin's Key Guide series, with further titles planned including 'Australian Rainforest Plants' and 'Wildflowers'. This mammal guide is an update of Cronin's original book (Cronin 1991) and provides details on the behaviour, development, food and habitat of 173 mammals that live in Australia, including some that are introduced species. A distribution map and attractive illustration is provided for each species. Speaking of distributions – which mammal has the widest distribution in Australia (let's exclude humans)? The answer later!

The publisher describes the book as a 'handy family reference or a guide for the bushwalker or traveller'. Certainly it is lightweight and durable and could be of value in the field, but I suspect there are far more comprehensive references for the home and library, such as van Dyck and Strahan (2008).

The publisher also notes that the Key Guides have been 'years in the making', and unfortunately, it shows! For example, *Antechinus stuartii* was split into a number of species in the late 1990s; the Victorian form is now recognised as a distinct species *A. agilis*, and *A. stuartii* is confined to New South Wales and Queensland. Cronin's book does not mention these 'new' species. Thus a competitor guide (Menkhorst 2001) seems to be more authoritative, cover many more species and have a dichotomous identification key. I think readers who see the term 'key' in the book's title might be expecting to have at least some identification key provided – unfortunately, none is provided separately by Cronin.

The choice of species depicted in Cronin's book is puzzling. The introduction claims the book 'provides profiles of all the widespread and distinctive species together with a number of marine mammals'. I take it this means the book includes those species that are widespread and also includes species that are considered distinctive. Thus we have some species in the

book that have very restricted distributions (e.g. Rufous Hare-wallaby, Long-footed Potoroo, Dibbler) and others that are found

over most of Australia (such as Short-beaked Echidna and House Mouse). The answer to my previous question? It seems the House Mouse is the most ubiquitous, although the Echidna and certain bats (such as Gould's Wattled and the Lesser Long-eared) and the Dingo are not too far behind!

The query I have then, is how were the species chosen in the first place? For example, there are considered to be 24 extant species of *Pseudomys* in Australia, yet Cronin's book deals with only seven. If the criterion is breadth of distribution, then why are other taxa with very restricted distributions included?

These quibbles aside, the book is attractively presented, beautifully illustrated by Marion Westmacott and modestly priced. Cronin notes Australia has the world's second largest number of threatened species (behind the USA) and that 20% of our mammals are threatened. We also have a sobering number of extinct mammals – more than one third of the world's extinct mammals (i.e. those that have become extinct since being described) are Australian. Any resource that aims to increase our awareness of our wonderful mammals is thus to be supported.

References

- Cronin L (1991) *Key Guide to Australian Mammals* (Reed: Chatswood, NSW)
- Menkhorst P (2001) *A Field Guide to the Mammals of Australia* (Oxford University Press: South Melbourne)
- van Dyck S and Strahan R (eds) (2008) *The Mammals of Australia* (New Holland: Sydney)

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